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History of Del Monte Hotel

Del Monte Hotel Grounds and Buildings

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Roman Plunge Fact Sheet 2012

Monterey, California: Naval Postgraduate School.

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The Roman Plunge

Hotel Del Monte
Del Monte, California



*Artist's illustration of the Spanish Revival Hotel Del Monte, the Roman Plunge and solarium, 1926.
Special Collections & Archives, Dudley Knox Library, NPS*

A report prepared by
Special Collections & Archives
Dudley Knox Library
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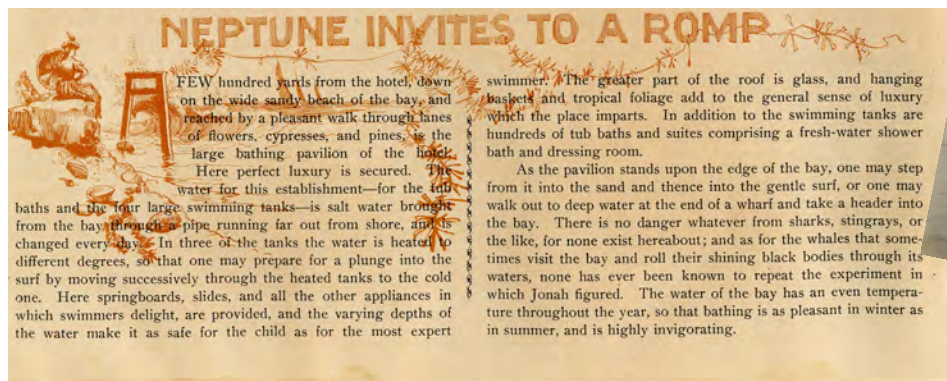
The Roman Plunge

Overview

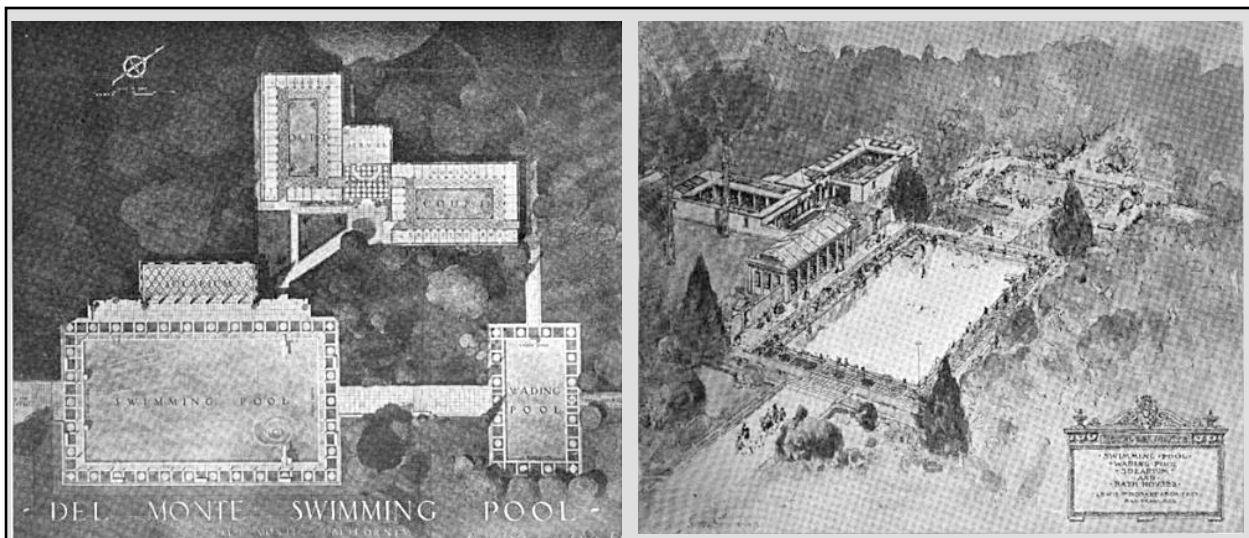
1915 was a turning point in the storied history of Hotel Del Monte. Pacific Improvement Company, the expansive holding company that had been established by The Big Four (Leland Stanford, Charles Crocker, Collis Huntington and Mark Hopkins) during the 19th Century development of the nation's first transcontinental railroad, hired S.F.B. Morse as P.I. Company manager.

Morse took an immediate interest in reviving the sagging fortunes of Hotel Del Monte. He fired the resort's general manager and hired Carl Stanley. He successfully marketed the hotel to visitors of San Francisco's Pan Pacific Exposition; drew celebrities and notables to the Del Monte, including Charlie Chaplin and an Essanay film crew; drafted plans for the Pebble Beach Golf Links; battled the Monterey fish canneries; and built the Roman Plunge and solarium.

The latter efforts were sparked by the canneries' custom of releasing fish offal into Monterey Bay where currents quickly washed the entrails onto local beaches and fouled the shoreline at the hotel's giant bathing pavilion.



Above: A description of Del Monte's bathing pavilion in a hotel booklet, 1897. Right: Unidentified guests on Del Monte Beach. The hotel's bathing pavilion is in the background. *Source: Dudley Knox Library, Special Collections & Archives.*



Architect Lewis Hobart's design for the Roman Plunge, solarium and children's pool at Hotel Del Monte. *Source: The Architect & Engineer, July 1920.*

Vice-President of United States Sees Girls Swim
 Special Dispatch to The Chronicle
San Francisco Chronicle (1869-Current File); Jun 19, 1920;
 ProQuest Historical Newspapers: San Francisco Chronicle (1865-1922)
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Vice-President of United States Sees Girls Swim

Special Dispatch to The Chronicle

DEL MONTE, June 18.—The third annual Del Monte girls' swimming carnival started off today in the Roman plunge with a big splash. Thomas R. Marshall, Vice-President of the United States, took the gun and sent the first field away, and there was a thousand Shriners who stopped off on their way to Portland among the spectators who crowded the lawns and solarium.

Rowena Crowley, the dainty San Francisco miss, distinguished herself by taking the 220-yard handicap race with a ten-second handicap and leading in the plunge for distance with forty-eight feet.

The heats of the fifty-yard race saw some close competition, with Lella Dunkum of Stockton and Lillian Snowgrass of Oakland being the winners.

The fifty-yard breast stroke was almost a dead heat, with Dorothy Becker of Alameda just touching out Helen Martin of Oakland.

The preliminary diving race saw some clever work. Miss Aileen Allen, who was national champion in 1918, Miss Becker and Lillian Snowgrass showing to advantage.

The balloon race saw Miss Ruth Crane beating out Miss Crowley. Results:

50 yards—First heat won by Lella Dunkum; Ruth Crane second. Time, :32.25. Second heat won by Lillian Snowgrass, Helen Martin second, Rowena Crowley third. Time, :33.25.

Plunge—Rowena Crowley first, Helen Martin second, Aileen Allen third. Distance, 48 feet. 220-yard handicap—Won by Rowena Crowley (10 seconds); Lella Dunkum (5 seconds) second, Lillian Snowgrass (scratch), third. Time, 2:44.

50 yard breast stroke—Won by Dorothy Becker; Helen Martin second, Florence Freimann third. Time, :42.

Balloon race—Won by Ruth Crane; Rowena Crowley second, Lella Dunkum third.

Officials—Starter Jack Spaulding; Judges, M. E. Andrews, F. A. Parker and Charles Small, timers, Walter Christie, Preston Steiger and Mr. Wright.

Dorothy Becker broke the Pacific Coast record when she touched out Helen Martin in the fifty-yard breast stroke. It was sensational racing, and Miss Becker staged a great comeback after being out of swimming competition for five years.

There will be another programme tomorrow and Sunday to conclude the meet.

Roman Plunge in the News

Hotel Del Monte's Roman Plunge made headlines when Vice President Thomas Marshall fired the starting gun for a swim meet in 1920 and comedians pulled a prank on an estimated 5,000 onlookers in 1921.

Tank Comedians Play Hoax on the Del Monte Folks
San Francisco Chronicle (1869-Current File); Jul 18, 1921;
 ProQuest Historical Newspapers: San Francisco Chronicle (1865-1922)
 pg. 6

Tank Comedians Play Hoax on the Del Monte Folks

Special Dispatch to The Chronicle

DEL MONTE, July 17.—The most spectacular "wedding" in the history of fashionable Del Monte took place this afternoon. A crowd that numbered 5000 gathered on the lawns, terraces and solarium of the Roman plunge to take in the public marriage, which had been announced by members of the Olympic Club.

The "bride" turned out to be Al Blanc, and the groom was Charley Small. William La Rue acted in the role of the parson. The rest of the wedding party were Preston Steiger and Otto Schulz, flower girls; bride's father, Otto Wallfish; groom's father, Harry McKenzie; worst woman, Steve Guerin; best man, Bob Hanja.

There was a bridal procession around the picturesque Roman plunge, and the Del Monte orchestra furnished the music. The crowd gasped with astonishment when it was discovered the husky swimmers were "dressed" up. Great excitement prevailed when the platform was tipped and the entire "bridal party" fell into the water.

In the water baseball the Olympic Club scored another victory over the Del Monte team, the score being 3 to 1. Otto Schulz pitched another strong game against Preston Steiger. There were a number of exhibition diving and swimming events.

Roman Plunge in Sports and Cinema

The plunge became a center for many sporting events, including water baseball, and served as the backdrop for Reginald Denny's arrival at Hotel Del Monte in the 1924 Universal Studio film, *Sporting Youth*.

Water Baseball Feature at Del Monte This Week-End

San Francisco Chronicle (1869-Current File); Jul 28, 1922;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: San Francisco Chronicle (1865-1922)

pg. 23

Water Baseball Feature at Del Monte This Week-End

DEL MONTE, July 27.—The old familiar cry "play ball" will soon ring out at the Del Monte Roman Plunge Saturday and Sunday afternoon. Baseball fans who will be in the big crowd will be to the novelty of seeing the national pastime played in the water. It is a novel sport that has been tried at Del Monte for the past two seasons and has proved one of the most interesting of the many sports that are staged at Del Monte during the course of the season.

A team of Olympic Club swimmers, headed by Charley Small, is

coming to Del Monte to measure strokes with the Del Monte Club. Charles Small and Harry Mackenzie will form the battery for the visitors, while Biddie Dorcy and Ashton Stanley will do the honors for Del Monte. The game is played the same as on the land, with the exception that the contestants swim and dive instead of run and slide.

The water baseball game will be the feature event of a series of aquatic stunts during the course of the two days. There is to be an open forty-yard race and an open

fifty-yard race, besides diving exhibitions and water stunts.

One of the interesting side attractions is the scheduled international fifty-yard race. The United States, England, France and Mexico are to be represented by swimmers in the contest.

Below: *Sporting Youth's* producers also used the Roman Plunge and hotel grounds for an important plot twist in the film.

Courtesy of UCLA Film Archives



Above: Screen captures of actor Reginald Denny driving a custom-made Packard for the movie, *Sporting Youth*. Courtesy of UCLA Film Archives

Scenes from the Roman Plunge 1920-1940



Right: The Roman Plunge prior to the hotel fire in 1924 and during a sporting competition in 1938.

Left (top to bottom): Hotel Del Monte postcard, circa 1922; Del Monte aquatics team, circa 1940; Model shows latest swimwear fashion at Roman Plunge show, 1936; Hotel Del Monte postcard, circa 1938.

Source: Dudley Knox Library, Special Collections & Archives.

Del Monte Publicist Recalls Glory Days of Roman Plunge

Herb Cerwin, publicist for Del Monte Properties Company in the 1930's, visited the Naval Postgraduate School in the late 1960's. He wrote a short article, "Hotel Del Monte, Revisited," which was published in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. An excerpt from his typewritten manuscript tells the story of Jean Harlow at the Roman Plunge and recalls many of the other celebrities who enjoyed swimming in the plunge.

HOTEL DEL MONTE, REVISITED

By Herbert Cerwin

The other day when we were on the Monterey peninsula, my wife and I were invited by friends to have a drink in the Officer's Club of the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School. As we drove in, we saw the once familiar tower of Hotel Del Monte, which, before the Navy took it over, was the most social of the resorts. Everyone who could afford it (and even those who couldn't) went to Del Monte. I was there because that is where I worked from the time I was barely twenty until shortly after Pearl Harbor. Now, over thirty years later, I was to see Del Monte again. With some misgivings we parked the car where I used to park every morning. We walked through the grounds. Long ago, trees of many varieties had been planted and identified with suitable labels. They were still there, including the monkey tree. But the Navy has brought in several peacocks which parade around on the lawns that are as green and well-kept as ever.

We walked on to the swimming pool, then known as the Roman Plunge. At one time or another, almost every Del Monte guest had taken a dip in the pool or had sunbathed in the sandbox (it was called that). Jean Harlow had skinny-dipped at two in the morning, but it had been quietly hushed. Clark Gable, Ginger Rogers, William Powell had swam or sunbathed and so had Gloria Vanderbilt and Salvador Dali.

There was also a portly youth about my age who used to swim in the afternoons when I did. I asked him one day what he did. "I play the fiddle," he said. He was Yehudi Menuhin.

Below the Roman Plunge were the tennis courts where Bill Tilden and Charlie Chaplin had played.

We started walking back through the grounds toward the hotel. Hidden away among the trees were the Del Monte white stucco cottages with the red-tiled roofs where honeymooners stayed in the old days, and others who weren't exactly honeymooners. As I looked at the cottages, I wondered if the Navy personnel now occupying them knew they slept where Paulette Goddard, Gloria Swanson, Carole Lombard, Greer Garson, Charles Laughton and W.C. Fields had slept.



The Plunge in World War II

The Navy arrived at Hotel Del Monte in 1943 when it commissioned the Del Monte Pre-Flight School. The salt water Roman Plunge was used for exercises and drills for the combat-bound aviation cadets.

The plunge became a fresh water pool after the war, when the Navy purchased the hotel and moved the Naval Postgraduate School to Monterey.

Roman Plunge scenes from World War II. Source: Dudley Knox Library, Special Collections & Archives.



This Dudley Knox Library report was prepared by John Sanders.